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Conserving water for 'the fishes' of a child

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My Turn

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When 6-year-old Teresa Humphrey of Glendale starts to brush her teeth, she turns off the faucet and mumbles through toothpaste foam, "Gotta save water for the fishes."

Her mother, Linda, chuckles with pleasure at this small act of conservation, even as she worries whether there will be enough water in the future for both her family and the fish and wildlife of the arid Southwest.

Teresa and Linda are two of the more than 20 million residents of the Southwest and Southern California who, together with scores of fish and wildlife species, rely on water from the Colorado River.

Having experienced what may be the worst five-year drought in five centuries, the people, the communities, farmers and industries in the driest area of our nation have had good reason for concern that their water and power supplies could be disrupted in the future and that fish and wildlife populations would continue to decline.

Today, however, they also have a great reason for hope. After years of hard work by a team of dedicated biologists, water managers and water users, the Interior Department and many state, tribal and local partners are cutting the ribbon on a comprehensive management plan to meet the needs of people and wildlife on the lower Colorado River.

The Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program is our nation's most innovative partnership to address the conservation and recovery of threatened and endangered species on a river system.

Nearly a decade in the making, the conservation plan considers all existing uses and incorporates all projected future uses of the river's water by Arizona, California and Nevada. It provides on-the-ground solutions to promote the recovery of endangered species and the conservation of other fish and wildlife on more than 400 river miles of the lower Colorado, from upper Lake Mead to our border with

Mexico.

In doing so, it will restore and enhance habitats along the lower Colorado and help prevent conflicts between the demands of a growing population and the needs of the unique fish and wildlife of the Southwest.

Over the next 50 years, federal, state and local governments will invest more than \$626 million to restore four major types of habitat along the river: aquatic, emergent marshes, lower-terrace cottonwood and willow-riparian woodlands, and upper-terrace native mesquite bosques.

Collectively, restoration of these types of habitats will help recover federally protected species, including the endangered bonytail chub, razorback sucker, humpback chub, yuma clapper rail, and southwestern willow flycatcher.

The initiative also will improve conditions for 13 other at-risk species - from songbirds to frogs to a rare plant - reducing their likelihood of needing to be protected under the Endangered Species Act. Likewise, the restoration of wetlands and riparian forests under the plan will benefit bird species that range from hummingbirds to ducks.

Because the plan anticipates future water usage, it puts protections in place now, well in advance of changes in water usage. This will make it easier for water and power users throughout the region, including the cities of Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix and Tucson, to comply with federal and state laws, while continuing to receive access to water and power from the Colorado.

Working together, we are taking a bold step to ensure that when Teresa grows up, she and her children not only will be able to turn on the faucet when they brush their teeth but also enjoy the unique desert river habitat and the great variety of fish and wildlife native to the Southwest.

The writer is secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Information on the Lower Colorado Multi-Species Conservation Program is online at www.lcrmscp.org.

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